Free Films for the Millions

Sympathy for the Seeing Leads One-Time Blind Man, With a Young Woman's Help, to Become Picture Distributor for the World

By AARON HARDY ULM

IF YOU were stricken blind and were forced to live in darkness for years, what type of unfortunates would seem to you to be most needful of help? The blind? That perhaps is the usual reaction. But it wasn't the reaction of a man the writer talked to the other day. For eighteen years that man was blind, but his thought and sympathy turned not so much to those who are sightless as to the millions who can see.

"If my sight is ever restored," he resolved, "I shall devote the remainder of my life to helping people with good eyes to see." For the memories of what he had seen during the days of good sight were his most satisfying resource during his years of blindness. Though he had traveled widely, observed with care and read much—in fact, his blindness was due to excess reading under bad conditions—he often regretted that he had not used his eyes for storing his mind with even more food for reverie when he could no longer see. The run of people, he concluded, were to be pitied for failure or lack of opportunity to use and enjoy the blessings of sight as they might.

Today he directs probably the most extensive motion picture organization in the world. Films sent out by him are viewed by more than 2,000,000 persons every month. One of his exhibiting units is now in the wilds of the Philippines showing western civilization to ex-head hunters. Another is in Sumatra. One is in India. Others are scattered throughout the United States. Films are sent into half the countries of the world almost every day and others are brought from them to this country. One condition attaches to every film handled or displayed: no one must be asked or permitted to pay for seeing it no matter how or where shown. More than thirty governments co-operate officially in the work of the man who was once blind and now wants to teach all the world to see—and is doing it on a scale you would hardly think possible.

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DR. FRANCIS HOLLEY

He is Dr. Francis Holley and his establishment is known as the Bureau of Commercial Economics, with headquarters in Washington, D. C. Though it works for and with our government and those of other countries, it is not a public institution. Neither is it commercial, though numerous trade bodies work with it. In the broadest sense it is educational and, in every sense, international. It charges for nothing it does and therefore earns no money. Yet funds for its support are not begged. It is supported, says its literature, by "endowment, annuity and voluntary subscription," but it is an open secret that Dr. Holley himself supplied the funds for founding it and most of the money needed for carrying it on. In addition to giving all of his time to the work, Dr. Holley meets all money deficits resulting therefrom.

Dr. Holley is a civil engineer by profession and has been admitted to the bar. He educated himself, having gone to work as a messenger when 13 years old. He became a builder of railroads, chiefly in Canada and the Far West, being associated for a long time with the Canadian Pacific System. At the time he was stricken blind, by strain caused by excess studying at night, often in tents with only a candle for light, he had accumulated a competency. He lost his sight in the early nineties. He spent the next eighteen years wandering the world in search of a cure, which he finally found, in partial form, in Pittsburgh, where a specialist in electrical treatment restored about one-third of his normal sight.

In 1902, while he was wandering through a cutlery factory in Sheffield, England, his companion in describing the work told him of two boys, one of whom was standing at each end of a work table watching the skilled workmen.

"What are they there for?" Dr. Holley asked the manager.

"They are apprentices and pay the company $125 a year each for the privilege of learning the trade," he replied.

"How do they get the money?"

"They earn it by working out of hours in the early morning and night."

"Why don't you have motion pictures made of the workmen in action and let the boys learn from them?"

"Impossible."

Dr. Holley asked if they would let him have the idea tried out. He went to Paris and persuaded Pathé to let him take an expert movie photographer to the factory in England. There the machine was rigged up over a work table and a series of motion pictures were made. They proved entirely adequate for the apprentices, but ten years passed before the man who had them made saw them displayed. But during those years he became convinced that the motion pictures offered the best means for helping people use and enjoy blessed eyesight. He made plans whereby pictures could be given distribution beyond the range of the commercial movie business and be employed for purposes outside the realm of mere entertainment.

The medium he developed is quite elaborate and far-reaching. He began by bringing the subject to the attention of the American Association of College Presidents. He proposed to do the work if the members of the organization would help with advice and support. They adopted the name by which the establishment is known, a name that doesn't convey an exact or even a fair picture of what is done. He then went before state legislatures and persuaded many to provide funds for extension work with pictures to be carried on by the state universities, or the agricultural and normal schools. It is through those institutions that the bureau mostly functions in this country. It gets the pictures and often supplies the conveyances and apparatus used in taking them about and displaying them. The colleges make up the itineraries, look after the publicity and attend to incidental expenses. The bureau now owns and operates more than thirty automobile trucks specially designed and built for the work. On the top of each big truck there is a screen frame made of metal. Inside the truck there is an electric motor, projection machine and a phonograph with a sound amplifier.

Thus, excepting when weather is bad, buildings are not needed and are rarely used to give exhibitions. A screen can be set up in a jiffy's time in a park or street, in a field or on a vacant lot. The picture is projected from the truck to the screen. For exhibitions given with a program having a specific purpose in view there is advance publicity. It is never difficult, however, to get a crowd. It is better frequently to give shows entirely unannounced. In those cases, the truck is driven around the town where the exhibition is to be given. The man in charge goes to the local telephone exchange and has the manager inform the operators of what is to be done. Early in the evening the screen is set up, the phonograph started and in due time the crowd shows up—a larger crowd as a rule than when advance announcement is made. For the unexpected appearance of the truck and the phonograph music, amplified so that it may be heard for a mile or so, piques curiosity. People call up the telephone exchange to know what it is all about, are told, and then they hasten to the center of town to see for themselves.

"Frequently our equipages are taken for patent medicine or similar outfits, but when the people find that there is no surprise for them at the end of the show their pleasure is all the more and the effect is better," says Dr. Holley.

The bureau was among the first in this country to use a Frenchman's invention that makes daylight pictures possible. It enables them to give displays in work shops during the noon hours.

Phonograph records are made in singing keys so that crowds may join in and sing with them.

What kind of pictures are shown?

Virtually every kind except the sort proclaimed so loudly by the movie theaters of the large towns and cities. There are no "Midnight Meddlings" and "Love and Live" stuff, and in those localities where the trucks navigate most of the time no such pictures are wanted.

The films are informative. They show life in other lands and in different parts of our own country. They show how things are done; how various articles are made, for example. In a booklet issued recently 932 different films are listed, by titles, as available for use in this country alone. The first one on the list is entitled "Out of the Mud," being a good roads picture, prepared very probably by the United States Good Roads Bureau. Other titles taken at random are "Evolution of Writing," "Making Grape Juice," "A Day with a Park Ranger," "Skiing at Chamonix," "Battle of Cambrai," the last one on the list being, "Little Country Theater." The purpose is to teach as well as to inform and entertain. Thus, in addition to general exhibitions, many of a campaign or propaganda nature are provided for. At the present time one on behalf of good roads is being conducted at the behest of a good roads association in a southern state. Frequently a farming problem, like the cattle tick or the boll weevil in the South, is attacked by pictures sent forth by the bureau. At another time it may be a health problem, like malaria or infantile paralysis.

The motto of the bureau is "The Eye Beholds." Dr. Holley's theory is that you can attack anything with pictures, ignorance, prejudice, restlessness; and that they afford the best and quickest way for carrying information and visual delights to masses of people.

The infant mortality rate in India is terrific; in some parts of that poverty-stricken land, two of every three children die in babyhood.

Co-operating with the authorities there, the bureau put on a picture campaign; and in some localities a huge reduction has been shown in deaths among infants. On the wall of Dr. Holley's office there is framed a draft for $125 representing penny contributions made by Hindoo women and children to show their appreciation for the work of the bureau. That work comprised pictures alone, along with others used to catch the eyes and hold the interest of the audiences those pictures showed how babies should be cared for. There was no lecturing, no "surveys" and no pamphlets which the illiterates couldn't read and others would not be able to understand.

The bureau has used pictures in a similar way for fighting tuberculosis among the Eskimos of the Arctic regions, as well as for carrying knowledge of the outside world to those remote peoples. The Eskimos at first were afraid of the pictures. Agents of the bureau had to make and display pictures of the people themselves before they would permit exhibitions of something that at first seemed to them to be supernatural.

Health campaigns have been made in Mexico, South America and many other countries.

But the philanthropic is only a feature of the bureau's work. It is just as ready to give world distribution to a film that tells the story of American machinery or other kind of product we have to sell, as to fight a disease. Thus manufacturers and trade associations use it as a clearing house for informing the world about our industries. The bureau requires the pictures to be truthful and permits of no mere advertising or boosting. For example, it will send out a picture supplied by an American hat manufacturer. It shows the details of making good hats in this country. But when shown it will probably be accompanied by pictures displaying hat manufacture in other countries.

"What we seek to do," says Dr. Holley, "is, first in such a case, to show people how hats are made and promote the making of better hats. If our hat industry is thus given a wider market, well and good.

"While we co-operate freely with trade interests we are in no sense commercial. We charge no fees, earn no money and declare no dividends.

"Our main purpose is to carry pictures, and the right ones—the kind that will enable them to enjoy to the full the rich blessing of eyesight—to people who wouldn't otherwise see them. We don't care where those people are or in what country, we want to reach them—the more remote they are the more anxious we are to get to them pictures that will lighten their lives, broaden their outlook and help solve their problems." The bureau doesn't produce pictures, except on a lim-

MISS A. MARIS BOGGS,

Dean of the Bureau of Commercial Economics. A graduate of Bryn Mawr, she has given ten years of her life to bettering the world through the eyes of mankind. "The best-known woman in the world," says Dr. Holley who, with her help, founded the bureau.

Few Know of Their Work

RUSKIN wrote that there are a hundred persons who can talk, to one who can think, and a thousand who think, to one who can see. To help the millions everywhere, who have eyes but do not or cannot see as they should, to enjoy the blessed gift of sight, is the life-work of a wealthy man who for eighteen years was blind. Through the organization developed by him and a girl he terms "the best-known woman in the world" more than 2,000,000 persons in all parts of the world see helpful, informative and entertaining "movies" every month. And not one has ever been permitted to pay a penny for the privilege. Here is a stimulating story of true philanthropy that, although under way for several years and world-wide in its operations, has been done so quietly that rarely has a line appeared in the public prints concerning it.